

Chapter 02: The Mahāsāṅghikas

About a hundred years after the Buddha's Mahāparinirvāṇa, the Sangha began to split for the first time, representing a confrontation between the conservatives and liberal. This was the first step that led to a transformation in Buddhism.

During the Buddha's time, monks live harmoniously due to the presence of the Buddha. It was the Buddha's charismatic presence that was leading the community. No vinaya rules were formed as they were committed; rules then became necessary when there was corruption and defilements.

The reasons for the split were likely due to a combination of vinaya and doctrinal dispute. According to the Theravāda, it was due to the ten illegal Vinaya acts. According to the Northern tradition, it was due to the controversy of Mahādeva's five propositions. (Cakra, T49, 15a; MVS, 511c):

1. arhants can be tempted,
2. they still have ignorance
3. they still have doubt.
4. they need the instruction of others.
5. the path can be induced by sound.

Lack of communication as well as lack of central authority and the development of independent centres were some of the reasons for the split of the Sangha into two, namely, Sthaviravāda (Pāli: Theravāda) and Mahāsāṅghika. The name Mahāsāṅghika is taken to be suggestive of the fact that this section contains the majority. This Mahāsāṅghika sect is reputed to have been formed after Mahādeva, who held the five heterodox views. Their original centre appeared to have been in Magadha and were also present in Southeast India around Amarāvati and Nagarjunakonda whereas the Sthaviravādins were in the Northeast. These Mahāsāṅghikas had two famous monasteries near the Amarāvati and the Dhānyakaṭaka, which gave their names to the schools of the Pūrvaśailas and the Aparāśailas. They differed from the elders in including lay practitioners and non-enlightened monks at the communal meetings which constituted the governmental body for each saṅgha, allowing monks to use gold and silver and eat twice a day, and also asserted that the historical Buddha was a manifestation of a trans historical Buddha, and phenomena are illusory and empty.

In the early years, the Mahāsāṅghika could not make headway because of the strong opposition from the orthodox monks, the Sthaviravādins. They struggle hard to establish themselves in Magadha and steadily gained strength to become a powerful sect. The best known work of the Mahāsāṅghikas is the Mahāvastu. Their headquarters in Sri Lanka were in the Abhayagiri vihāra, and King Sena I is said to have built the Vīrankurārāma for their use.

Though the Mahāsāṅghika cannot be called the original Mahāyanist, their tradition greatly influenced the rise of Mahāyana, especially the Lokottaravādins opened the way for Mahāyana to develop. The Lokottaravādins, an offshoot of Mahāsāṅghikas gradually raised the Buddha to a super human level by putting forward that the

Buddha was a transcendental being, whose body is not of this world. The Mahāsāṅghikas also maintain that the bodies of the Buddha pervades the whole universe. This view involves the plurality of Buddhas. It also involves a distinction between the mundane and the supra mundane bodies which later also made it possible to identify the true body of the Buddha with ultimate reality. The Mahāsāṅghikas became the symbol of liberalizing movement.

Contributions of Mahāsāṅghika's Doctrines in Cakra

The Mahāsāṅghika recognized Buddha as their Teacher. Both schools of Theravāda and Mahāsāṅghika shared the most important doctrines of Buddha's Teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Paths, Three characteristics, Dependent Origination (Pratītyasamutpāda), Universal law of Karma, and the thirty-seven factors of Enlightenment and the gradual stages of advancement.

The Mahāsāṅghikas, the precursor of Mahayana, demonstrated their differential entity in their rejection of the canonical texts of the Parivara, the Paṭisambhidā, the Niddesa and parts of the Jātakas approved in the First Council of Theravādins. The Mahāsāṅghikas codified their own five-part canons viz.: the Sūtra, the Vinaya, the Abhidharma, the dhāraṇīs and Miscellaneous. Another point of divergence between the Mahāyānist and the Theravādins is the concept of the Middle Path. In Theravāda, the Middle Path refers to a life of moderation avoiding extremes of self-mortification or inordinate sensual indulgences; but in the Madhyamika metaphysical system which is a branch of Mahāyāna, the middle path signifies a theory of relativity, neither reality nor unreality of the world, neither existence, nor non-existence, neither self nor non-self. The Mahāsāṅghika wanted to raise the position of Buddhism into the uppermost level.

All these doctrines are distinctively Mahāsāṅghikas. According to them: Buddha-s, the world honoured (Bhagavant) are all supramundane and had no worldly attributes. They do not pass through the embryonic stage of ordinary beings, and never experience feelings of lust.

The Buddha that the Mahāsāṅghika spoke of is not the historical Buddha but the Nirmāṇa-kāya or incarnation of the Sambhoga-kāya. The Mahāsāṅghika Buddhology is one of the earliest gems of the later Trikāya theory developed in Nagarjuna's Prajñāpāramitā sastra and in later Yogācāra literature. The mortal being Siddhartha Guatama Buddha was required only for conforming to the worldly ways for the benefits of this world.

All Tathāgata-s are free from impure (with-outflow) dharma-s. The Mahāsāṅghika-s hold that the physical body of Buddha does not have any defiled elements because all passions (klesa) and vāsanā (impressions) are externally destroyed. Stated in the sūtras, although Tathāgata is born in this world, abides by it, and appears in it, yet he is not stained by the worldly dharmas.

All the words of the Tathāgata are the turning of Dharmacakra. Turning the wheel of the law is a well known phrase used at Benares when the Buddha imparted his first sermon to the five Brahmins. The Buddha speaks the Truths only. All the speeches of the Tathāgata are concerned with the preaching of the righteous law and are

conducive to enlightenment on the part of the hearers. The Sūtra-s spoken by the Buddha is of ultimate meaning. The Buddha preaches all Dharma-s in one sound, meaning he can expound all the doctrines with a single utterance. In one moment all dharma-s can be known. The Buddha trained his mind for a number of kalpas. There is no one who can surpass the Buddha in understanding all things (dharma-s).

The Tathāgata's physical body is in reality boundless, and His powers are also boundless. His life, energy and power are limitless, he is always possessed and in Samadhi. The divine power of the Buddha pervades all the worlds in all directions in a moment even without Buddha exercising his mind. The physical body here means the Sambhoga-kāya and not the historical body of the Buddha. The life of the Sambhoga-kāya continues to exist as long as the sentient beings continue to exist. Sentient beings think he does and become overjoyed.

It was for the enlightenment of worldly beings that the lokottara Buddha adopted human form to enable people to imitate his examples and ultimately attain Buddhahood. They are a class of beings who by passing through various trials and making immense self-sacrifices rose to higher stage of Bodhisattvahood. They could attain Buddhahood in the course of time. The most important doctrines that resulted in this way are the theory of the Bodhisattva. The concept of many bodhisattvas simultaneously working toward Buddhahood is also found among the Mahāsāṅghika tradition, and further evidence of this is given in the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, which describes the doctrines of the Mahāsāṅghikas. Theravādins aim to be arahant, not Buddhahood and the Mahāsāṅghikas do not look upon the arahant as the higher stage.

In order to benefit sentient beings, the Bodhisattva wills to be born in the evil existences and he can go there as he wishes. For the benefits of all classes of sentient beings, Buddhas are born of their own free will in any form of existence they choose. The aspirant developed bodhicitta and by fulfilling Pāramitās to become a predestined Bodhisattva, then a Buddha. Importance was placed on Bodhicitta than on Brahmachariya and ariyamagga. Career is marked more by love and compassion for suffering beings than by path culture. Has no trace of desire, hatred or malice.

Cittā-caitta-s can know their intrinsic natures – Jhāna, etc, can know itself; like a lamp that illuminates itself as well as others. This doctrine influenced the Sautrāntika → Yogācāra. Two cittā-s can arise simultaneously in a person. (47b. Cf Sandhinirmocana-s Sūtra). Retribution-cause (karma) and retribution-effect are cittā and caitta-s only. The cittā is intrinsically pure. It is said to be impure when defiled by adventitious defilements. A sotāpanna is capable of knowing his own nature (svabhāva) through his cittā and citasika. An average man and sages other than a sotāpanna cannot know the nature of their minds as clearly as the sotāpanna does.

Past and future dharma-s are unreal entities. Only present dharma-s are real. The Mahāsāṅghikas maintained that dharma-s do not exist in the past and future, they only exist in the present. Phenomena came into existence in accordance with the law of momentary changes. If past, the dharma-s or things have already been destroyed and for the future dharma-s they have not been brought into being. So dharma-s exist only in the present moment.

It was the Mahāsāṅghikas who originated the worship of caityas and said that great merits could be accumulated by circumambulating a stūpa. Suffering leads a man to the Path. The experience of suffering (dukkha-vedanā) in this world is bound to give a man a feeling of aversion to it. And this feeling in its turn, leads him to renunciation and eventually to the Aryan Path. Most of these doctrines contributed to the Yogācāra development.

Root consciousness

The Mahāyāna-saṃgraha (The Mahāyāna Compendium):

“The Mahāsāṅghikas teaches the Root-consciousness (根本識), as a tree that has the root as its supporting basis.” This seems to have developed from the doctrine that all the six consciousnesses arise with manas (mind) as its supporting basis.

Sandhinirmocana-sūtra: “Supported by and established by the Yogacārā concepts such as the ālaya vijñāna (阿陀那識 = ālaya vijñāna), the six groups of consciousness arise ”

The Root-consciousness is cited by Yogacārā in support for their ālaya vijñāna doctrine. In fact this name is even sometimes used as a synonym for ālaya vijñāna.

E.g., In the *Thirty Verses on Cognition-only* (唯識三十論):

“With the Root-consciousness as the supporting basis, the five consciousnesses arise in accordance with conditions [and] the mental consciousness always arises.”

The Subsuming Consciousness *Treatise on Elucidating Consciousness* (顯識論) says that in the Mahāsāṅghika, the power of perfuming (熏習 *Vāsanā*) is called the ‘Subsuming Consciousness (攝識)’.

“It is a conditioning disjoined from thought. This is like reciting a sūtra: It is not acquired in the first recitation. In the second recitation, the [effect of the] first is subsumed. In this way up to the tenth recitation when it is fully mastered – [the accumulating effects of] all the preceding nine [recitations] are subsumed. In the same way, the modification of the initial consciousness is [subsumed] in the 2nd, in this way up to the ninth modification is [subsumed] in the tenth. The tenth is capable of subsuming all the preceding nine. This very efficacy for modification of the tenth is called ‘Subsuming consciousness’ endowed with the [accumulated] efficacies of the preceding nine; thus, the [efficacies of the] preceding nine are not lost”.

This accumulative subsumption of efficacy entails the ability of transforming a past power into a present form, so that the power at the present is enhanced. This is clearly a kind of perfuming (熏習)

Earliest Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra

According to Tibetan tradition, a sub-sect of the school, zaila, possessed a Prākṛit version of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra. This Prajñāpāramitā is said to be the oldest Prajñāpāramitā.

“At that time, there was a Mahāsāṅghika monk in Pataliputra, who followed also the Mahāyāna ... [and] studies the Vaipulya [sūtra-s]. A number of scholars have proposed that the Mahāyāna Prajñāpāramitā teachings were first developed by the Caitika subsect of the Mahāsāṅghikas. Ven Guang Xing also assesses the view of the Buddha given in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* as being that of the Mahāsāṅghikas.

Origin of Mahāyāna in South India

In the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra itself, it is stated as a prophecy that the Prajñāpāramitā doctrine will first start from South India, then spread to North. Most scholars believe that Mahāyāna originated in South India around 1st century C.E. Around that time, the Mahāsāṅghika sub-sect was very strong there and they contributed importantly to the emergence of Mahāyāna movement as there are certain ideas in the Mahāsāṅghika tradition which suggest that they are the precursor (forerunner) of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Although Fa Hsien procured the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya in India and had this translated into Chinese, the tradition of Chinese Buddhism eventually settled on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya instead. At the time of Faxian, the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya was the most common vinaya tradition in China.

It is seen that Mahāsāṅghikas made a very sharp distinction between the Arahant and the Buddha. They not only held that the Arahant could fall, but also upheld the view that it is relatively easy to become an Arahant and that attainment of Arahant hood is not the final attainment. One of the causes that led to the resentment against the Arahant idea appeared to be the development of the scholastic attitude among them. They being given to scholarship seem to have cut themselves off from the people and led more secluded life, concentrating more on memorizing the scriptures and working on ecclesiastical works. These rather secluded attitudes were interpreted by some of the monks as well as by lay people to be a very selfish attitude. Perhaps It is also possible that there were among these orthodox monks, some who claimed to be Arahant but who were not really so.

The five points criticism labeled against the Arahant idea by Mahādeva may have been targeting such monks. It later became a general criticism used against the Theravāda idea of Arahant hood. With the degradation of Arahant Idea, The Buddhahood rose in a very high esteem and naturally this led increase to the story about the Buddha, and also to the story of his former lives. This is how gradually the Bodhisattva Ideal came into prominence. Mahāyāna Buddhism grew out of the Mahāsāṅghika schools, and the members of the Mahāsāṅghika schools also accepted the teachings of the Mahāyāna.